

The Master Key By John Fleming Wilson

Tenth Installment.

By special arrangement for this paper, a photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Master Key," may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Mfg. Co., it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" each week, but also afterwards to see moving pictures illustrating our story.

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SYNOPSIS—Two prospectors, James Gallon and Harry Wilkerson, are partners. Gallon makes a rich find and draws a temporary plan of the location of the vein of gold. Wilkerson tries to steal these plans. Gallon resists and they quarrel. In the fight Gallon kills his partner, and leaves him lying in the camp. Gallon arrives in a small western town where he tells the sheriff that he and his partner were attacked by outlaws and that his partner was killed. The sheriff, his posse and Gallon go to the scene of the fight, but they do not find Wilkerson. The sheriff thinking Gallon has tricked him places him under arrest. Meantime Wilkerson has recovered and departed. That night Gallon makes his escape and later arrives in San Francisco. Here he takes ship. The captain of this vessel is collector of customs. Gallon's mind is uneasy and he has visions of Wilkerson returning for the plans. In the captain's cabin is a chest where he keeps his curios. Gallon opens this and finds a Japanese idol with one eye. He removes the eye and hides the plans in the idol. A fire breaks out in the ship, causing a fight among the sailors to get into the boats. Gallon returns to the deck to secure the chest and is left on board. The ship sinks, but Gallon saves himself. Having nothing on which to write he takes a key and an old nail and on the key scratches the probable location in latitude and longitude of the ship when it sank. He is picked up by a passing steamer and 18 years later endeavors to find the location of the gold strike, but does not succeed. At this time John Dorr, the superintendent of the Master Key mine, rescues Ruth, Wilkerson's daughter, from a tragic death following an explosion in the mine. Ruth, while exploring the tunnels, is thrown into an ore car by the explosion, which sends the car on its downward flight over the trestle. Dorr, while superintending the operations for a traveling bucket, sees her predicament, orders the bucket swung loose by its cable, and hanging down by his legs, he springs over the girl and pulls her up to him, the car rushing on and smashing over the ore dump. Constantly thinking of his former partner, Wilkerson, James Gallon is haunted by an apparition of the man he had robbed. His troubled mind almost becomes unbalanced by his anxiety. Wilkerson, who is alive, has continually searched for Gallon, and writes his cousin, a Mrs. Darnell, in New York, that he is at last on the right track. He arrives at the mine and confronts Gallon, who falls from fright. Wilkerson is seeking gold for the sake of a woman. John Dorr, the mining engineer in whose charge Ruth was left, is also fighting to find the secret which Thomas Gallon apparently took with him to his grave.

Wilkerson's fall from the trestle had not been unnoticed by his outlaws, and before anyone in the camp could make sure that the man was dead a couple of the Mexicans had quickly slipped down the hill to him. They found him still alive. Without paying any attention to John Dorr's men, who were still doubtful of the outcome of the battle, they dragged their fallen leader away and up into their own temporary camp.

It was not long before Wilkerson revived. He was terribly bruised and almost insane from physical pain and wild rage at his defeat. It was with difficulty that the unsmiling outlaws restrained him. Their chief took upon himself the task of making it plain to Wilkerson that this was no time for rash and unorganized attack.

"They have beaten us so far, senor," he said, quietly. "And you are very sick. Tomorrow we shall see!"

The next morning's sun had scarcely touched the peaks of the mountains when Wilkerson stretched his stiff, sore limbs and began a fresh campaign. He made it clear to the leader of the Mexican outlaws that they must work swiftly.

"It won't be long before the news of this fighting gets out and the authorities take a hand," he said. "But if we can just get this mine into our possession in the next three days, I can hire you and your men as peaceable workmen and swear that Dorr and his gang are trying to take our property away by force. I guess my word will be as good as his!"

"Very well," agreed the Mexican, after thoughtfully considering the matter. "We can get back into Mexico in twenty-four hours from here. So long as you pay us and let us—what do you call it?—loot, my men are with you."

Wilkerson covertly studied the desperado's impressive visage. Jose Vagas bore a renowned name on the border for daring, shrewdness and wickedness. He was known as "The Merciless." For five years he had had a price set on his head, yet because of the loyalty of his adherents and his own fearlessness he had escaped. No man better fitted for a sinister purpose could have been found. Yet mingled with Wilkerson's satisfaction at having such a tool to his hand was a dread of the man himself. And his calm insistence on the privilege of looting the camp when it was captured gave him a sense of nausea. After all they were Americans down there in the Master Key camp. Through his binoculars he could see Ruth on the porch of the bungalow. Vagas, too, saw her. He took no pains to conceal the cruel interest in his eyes.

The next few days resulted in little advantage to either side. John Dorr could not reopen the mine nor even send in for much-needed supplies because of the constant menace of the outlaws, who occasionally fired scattering shots down into the gulch as a warning that they were vigilant. On the other hand, Wilkerson found it impossible to seize the camp without precipitating a battle from which he shrank. Deeply involved as he already was in crime he dreaded to cross the border line which would forever place him beyond the pale and make him an outlaw.

Instead, he used every method to put himself outwardly in the right. He sent plea after plea to the sheriff of the county to come and restore order, asserting that he had been driven from his rightful property by violence and that the situation was such that without interference from the authorities there would be serious trouble and very likely bloodshed.

These pleas availed only partially. The sheriff made a trip into the mine, talked with John Dorr and Tom Kane and then sought out Wilkerson.

"It looks to me as if this was a case for the courts," he said, slowly, when he had examined Wilkerson's forged deeds. "I knew old Gallon pretty well and he thought a sight of that Ruth girl. Fact is, he told me he intended her to have the mine, and left it to her in his will. Now you toddle along with these papers and want to take it away from her!"

Gallon and I were partners years ago," Wilkerson insisted. "We located this mine together and when I came back he gave me over my share."

"But you want it all," the sheriff said, dubiously.

"Sure, it's all mine," persisted the other. "Didn't Gallon use all the money he got out of it while I was away? And when we came to a settlement he found that the mine wouldn't pay half he owed me?"

"I'm simply a peace officer," the sheriff said, finally. "I don't know who's in the right. That's for the court to decide."

"Wasn't I in possession?" demanded Wilkerson. "Haven't I been driven out by force, me and my workmen?"

"From what I've seen of your workmen," was the curt response, "I don't like their looks. And there are tales going around that Vagas is in the country."

"How can I help who's in the country?" demanded Wilkerson, much injured. "That's your lookout, not mine. All I'm asking for is protection."

The sheriff departed without giving him any satisfaction, and Wilkerson determined that he would act. The Mexicans were getting restless and the sardonic Vagas hinted sharply that he was impatient.

"All right," Wilkerson agreed. "We'll just go down to the road in the morning and then walk into the camp. Leave it to me. I'll simply say I've come back to take charge and you are my miners."

Vagas twirled his wiry mustaches. "And then?" The men looked each other in the eye. That evil glance was sufficient.

John Dorr and Tom Kane, meanwhile, had been in constant consultation. One thing was constantly in their thoughts.

"Ruth oughtn't to be here," John would say, dismally. "If it weren't for her, we could quickly settle those outlaws, for that's all they are."

"I reckon nobody would cry at the inquest," the cook returned, "if we did not a few of them. But as you say, the girl is here and that puts fighting out of the question. Unless they start it," he added, cautiously.

Wilkerson is bound to make some kind of a move mighty soon," said Dorr. "He can't satisfy those fellows of his for long."

Yet when Wilkerson appeared at the entrance to the camp one morning with a motley train of followers, Dorr was at a loss to know what to do. Wilkerson was apparently peaceful and expected a peaceful reception. His boldness had almost carried him through when the ignorance and cupidity of one of Vagas' men gave John and Kane the sorely wished-for opening.

The Mexican peered into the window of one of the cabins and saw a gold watch on the table. Instantly he broke the glass with the butt of his carbine and reached in for his booty.

Dorr and Kane had warned the miners at the first appearance of Wilkerson that there might be trouble brewing, but that the first blow must come from the other side.

"Boys," said the old cook, "you know the sheriff. He's listened to both sides and he don't rightly know which is the one to take. But one thing is certain: He's got to keep order and protect human life and our property. If those fellows make a wrong move we've got the sheriff on our side, see?"

They had seen the point, with many mutterings. They had quietly prepared themselves for just the occasion which the Mexican's act now gave. As the bandit pulled his arm back with the watch in his hand a revolver cracked and the arm fell shattered to his side. And as Wilkerson glanced furiously about him he saw the camp ready. He cursed the maddened Mexican and grasped Vagas by the arm.

"Stop your men!" he implored. "Don't let them fire a shot or we are lost!"

It was too late. Passions long restrained now broke out, and within a minute a battle was raging between the walls of the gulch.

The miners had the advantage. They fought from the shelter of their own cabins and they were united by a common purpose; their attackers were scattered, were divided between lust for loot and thirst for blood, and had no sure refuge nor rendezvous. Yet they would eventually have made the camp untenable had not the thoughtful sheriff prepared a surprise for both parties.

After consultation with his advisers in the county seat he had appealed to the governor, on the ground that as one of the opposing forces was Mexican he felt that a superior authority should handle so delicate a situation. The governor had agreed and ordered a troop of cavalry to the Master Key to preserve order. It was just when Wilkerson had seen his chance for a grand coup that the troopers arrived.

Ruth, with some of the women, had taken refuge in John's house on the hill, with old Tom Kane as their bodyguard. Wilkerson knew that if he could capture Ruth he could make his own terms. He directed several of his men to make a detour around the hill and effect this. Meanwhile he set fire to a cabin below in order to distract the attention of Dorr and his men.

The ruse had nearly succeeded but for Kane's quickness. Though he had not used his gun for many years he had lost none of his old-time skill, and when the marauders made their final dash on the porch of the house the cook with a single glance over his shoulder shot from the hip. His man tumbled dead at Ruth's feet, and his companions sneaked back. At that instant the cavalry rushed in, and before five minutes were passed their commander had separated the combatants and proceeded to disarm them.

He then called Dorr and Wilkerson to him and curtly stated that his orders were to see that there was no trouble. "What your quarrel is, I don't know," he said.

Wilkerson tried to argue, but neither the officer nor the sheriff, who now arrived, would listen to him. They also turned a deaf ear to John Dorr's statement of Wilkerson's crimes, including the kidnapping of Ruth in San Francisco.

"If you have anything against Wilkerson," the sheriff asserted, "swear out a warrant for him. I'll serve it quick enough."

With this John must perforce be satisfied, but after a conference with Kane it was agreed that the latter should go to the county seat and make formal complaint and procure a warrant for Wilkerson's arrest on the ground of forgery.

"You and I know those deeds he flourishes aren't genuine," John said, earnestly. "Let's make it an issue and try it in court. At any rate, we'll be rid of him for a while."

"I know you're right," the old cook assented, heartily. "I'll be off today. With these troopers around the greasers won't dare do anything openly. But keep your eyes open, John! They will sneak

something across, if they can."

"Trust me for that," was the reassuring response.

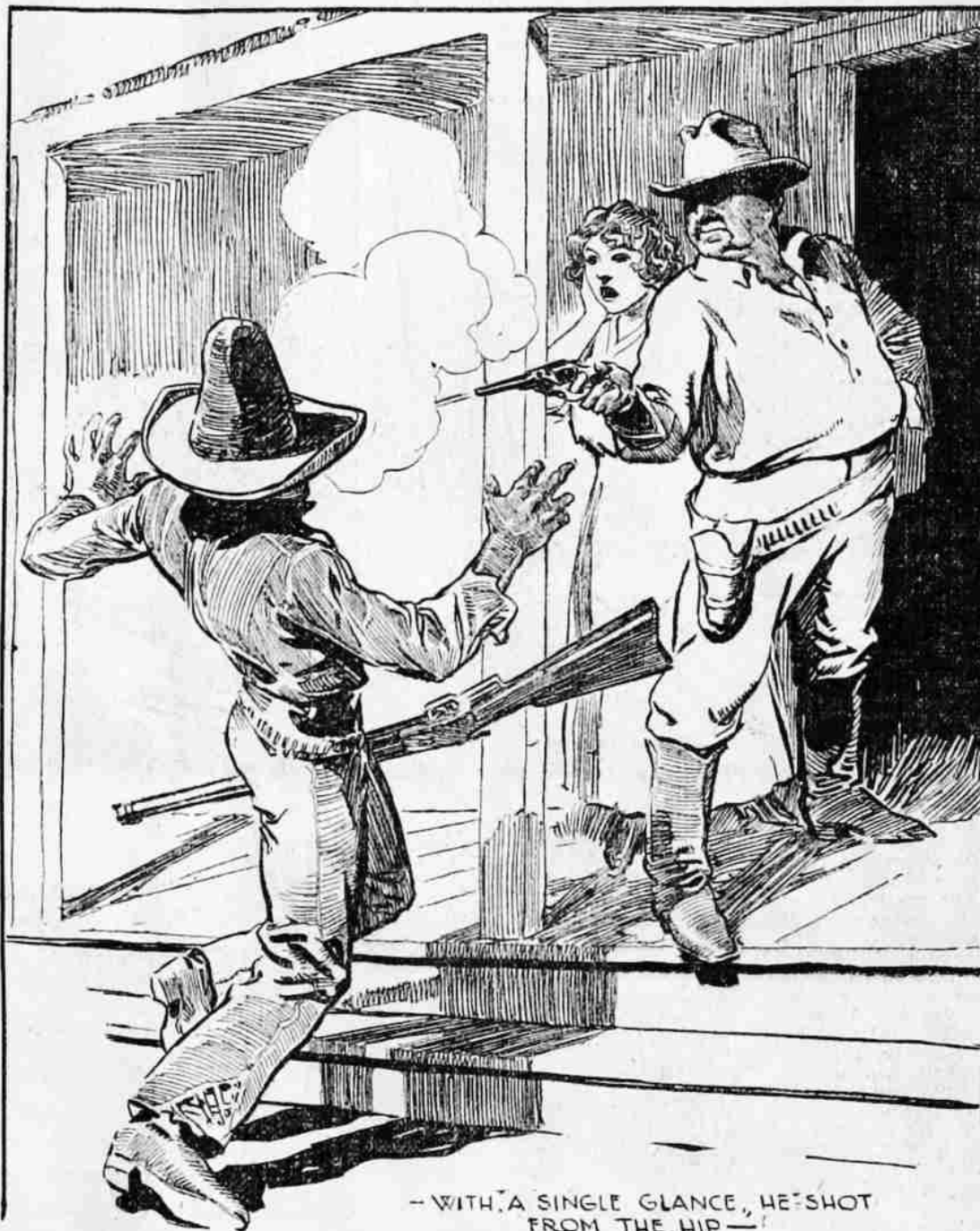
But when Kane had gone Dorr realized that he was in a nasty predicament. Wilkerson was desperately playing a bold game that it would take every resource at his disposal to meet him successfully. Ruth must be protected in her rights. The Master Key mine must remain in her possession undisturbed; that would be impossible until Wilkerson was eliminated. And that man was after great stakes, otherwise he would never have ventured so far.

As he debated this inwardly John went over in memory all the events of the brief period since old Thomas Gallon had died, leaving his daughter in his charge. Before his mind's eye ran the pictures of the last scenes and then—

Like a flash it came to him! What was in that letter the old man had so carefully cherished and handed him at the last? Had Gallon foreseen something like this and prepared for it? In his last days had his failing powers concentrated on his single aim and evolved a final safeguard for the Master Key?

With the sealed letter in his hand, John Dorr stared at the superscription:

NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL MY DAUGHTER'S EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY OR BEFORE THEN IF



HER WELFARE IS THREATENED.

Quickly he tore the envelope open. The enclosure fell out in two portions. He put them together, with a muttered ejaculation at his own carelessness, and read the crabbied script:

Silent Valley, California, June 20th.

Little Girl:

Read carefully what I write. On this depends your future welfare.

The Master Key mine, discovered by me five years ago contained a mother lode of inestimable worth. The exact location of the lode is written on a slip of paper which I placed in the head of an Indian idol in an old sea chest, which went down with the ship on which I was wrecked.

On the Master Key, the key to that chest, and which you wear on your neck, is carved the location where the vessel went down. Find that slip of paper and the wealth is yours.

Your devoted father,

THOS. GALLON.

For some moments Dorr stared at this message from the dead. True, it was addressed to Ruth; but its message was to him, John Dorr. Now he knew something of the tremendous stake for which Wilkerson was playing. So deep in thought was he that he did not notice that he was being slipped upon. He must see Ruth and tell her. He slipped the letter into his pocket, not observing that the torn portion dropped to the table.

As he hurried out, fat with his news, a Mexican stole into the room and after a keen glance around picked up the bit of paper. He had seen the triumphant expression on Dorr's face. That writing must be valuable. He tried to decipher it, but failed. So he thrust it into his shirt and stole away.

Half an hour later the last few lines of that letter were in Harry Wilkerson's hand.

It was not until he had explained to Ruth the circumstances under which he had opened the letter and handed her the enclosure that John discovered that the last portion was missing, the part that told of the figures on the key. Together they sought it, in vain.

"Well," said Ruth cheerfully, "at least I have the key and now we know what those figures stand for."

"Yes," he assented, "the latitude and longitude where the wreck sank. But I don't like the disappearance of that last part. It was rank carelessness of me. What if it should fall into Wilkerson's hands?"

Ruth laughed, dangling the key by its ribbon.

"We have the master key!"

"Yes," John replied, more cheerfully, "he won't know where the place is, anyway. But we must arrange to find that wreck and get the chest."

"But if the ship sank!" she said.

"Lots of people will remember the wreck," was the response. "And with this accurate position of where it went down a diver will be able to recover what we want."

They discussed this for some time and decided that as soon as Kane returned with the warrant for Wilkerson they would start out for San Pedro and proceed to locate the sunken vessel and find, if possible, the chest and its precious contents.

"With Wilkerson safely in the sheriff's hands and Kane on the job here all will be safe," John said, finally.

But Wilkerson, torn scrap of paper in his hand, was planning swiftly and certainly. With Vagas he laid a scheme for that night. When the details were settled the bandit smiled crookedly. "I'll get the key myself," he remarked. "It will be a pleasure!"

"No roughness!" warned Wilkerson.

"With a lady?" demanded Vagas, slyly. "Never!"

"All right!" was the response. "But remember these troopers aren't overly fond of you."

The Mexican made his preparations to get the

moment later he was footing it up to the crest at top speed, with the sentry's cries for help urging him on.

Before he could reach the divide a bullet whizzed by his head, then another. He turned madly and fired rapidly down into the shadows at his pursuers. He cursed himself for his folly when a second sentry appeared above him, drawn by the flash of his shots to his hiding place. There was but one refuge, the mine shaft. He plunged obliquely downward for it.

Naturally enough the troops thought their quarry was cornered, but Wilkerson drove straight on downward to an old working, mounted again, crossed by a disused galley and finally emerged far up the cliff. On his way he had picked up a coil of rope and when he found himself on the edge of the precipice and his pursuers gaining on him he made one end of the rope fast and speedily started to descend. But the distance was too great. Before he was halfway to the bottom he had been discovered and he felt the rope being hauled up. In despair, with a madman's strength, he swung far out and then in, dropping on a little ledge concealed by the overhang of the cliff.

As the rope came free in their hands the pursuers realized that their prey had escaped them. They peered over. Surely he had fooled the way only to meet death on the rocks far below.

On his giddy perch Wilkerson heard their awed speculations and laughed silently. Then he crawled away. In the distance he heard the screech of a locomotive whistle, marking the passage of an express. The freight would be due in two hours. He must make it.

Tom Kane arrived early in the morning to find the camp in an uproar. The Mexicans had quietly vanished, Ruth was mourning the loss of the master key and the sheriff, staring at the now useless warrant, was beyond words to express his chagrin.

John Dorr alone was serene, though he realized that Wilkerson had again checkmated him. But the immediate need of the hour was haste. He instructed Kane to take charge of the mine and directed Ruth to prepare for a trip to the coast that afternoon.

"Luckily I copied those figures," he said, grimly. Two days later John Dorr and Ruth were steaming up the channel from San Pedro in a launch fitted with diving outfit. The skipper of the launch remembered perfectly the burning of the steamer and now that he knew the position where it sank gave out great hopes of finding the hulk.

"The sea is shallow there, and the tides aren't strong enough to move her," he stated. "The only thing is, somebody may have been ahead of us."

"Wilkerson couldn't be ahead of us," John assured Ruth. "I inquired carefully at San Pedro."

Yet at noon his unspoken fears were realized. There was another powerful launch ahead of them which their captain identified as a diving and salvage boat from San Diego.

"Then they'll get ahead of us!" Ruth mourned. "After all our trouble!"

The launch captain and the diver both comforted her by stating that the given position was not far away, that it was sometimes a matter of days to find a wreck even if the approximate location was known, and that at any rate they would soon be near enough to see whether the other craft was successful.

Two hours later Wilkerson's launch was swinging easily over the low swells not a mile from the bluff shore and they could see his diver preparing to go down.

"I hope he doesn't find it!" breathed Dorr, as he urged his own men to greater speed.

"They've struck the spot, if those figures of yours are correct," was the reply. "But time will tell."

When the two boats were close together John saw that Mrs. Darnell was with Wilkerson. He could see the bronze glint of her eyes, her eyes filled with a mingling of triumph and hatred. And that look grew brighter and more malicious when the diver coming up from his first descent showed a large bit of wood, evidently from a wreck. Though they could not hear the words, those on Dorr's boat could understand the directions that were being given.

"Get over and send your man down, quick!" commanded Dorr.

The captain and the diver glanced at each other doubtfully. Then the former shook his head.

"No," he said, gruffly. "They found it and it's theirs by sea law. Anyway, I ain't going to send my man down when there's danger, as there always is with two men working under water at cross purposes."

"But they'll get the chest!" cried Ruth.

"Wait and see," said the imperturbable diver. Half an hour later John turned to Ruth and said miserably, "Well, they've got it! That ends this excursion!"

"Is that your chest, missy?" demanded the captain.

"Yes! Yes! My father's!"

"Well," he said, slowly, "there's nothing to hinder us going over and seeing what it all looks like, is there?" He signaled his engineer and put his helm over.

As they ranged alongside the other launch Wilkerson raised his face to Dorr's wrathful gaze and smiled. Instinctively John put his hand on his gun. A rough touch on his shoulder recalled him. "This ain't any practical cruise," the skipper remarked, meaningly. "That man was hired the same as me, and we ain't got no fight with each other."

"Of course!" Dorr agreed, unwillingly. Then he made a leap for the deck of the other boat, intent on regaining the chest single handed.

For the moment Wilkerson was paralyzed by the boldness of this move, but a moment later strong hands had flung John back on his own deck and his skipper, thinking that matters had gone far enough, soon put a safe distance between the two craft.

A little later Wilkerson's launch started off down the channel.

"Now or never," said Dorr to the captain of his own boat. Don't lose sight of them. I must know where they land and what they do with the chest."

"They're hurrying some," was the response, "but I guess we can keep 'em in view, at least till night comes on."

While the moon was lighting up the smooth waters of the channel that night Ruth tried to comfort John Dorr. And as he listened to her gentle words and watched the loveliness of her face under the silver beams he forgot the bitterness in his heart and knew something of a happiness that Wilkerson, pawing over water-soaked rags in raging despair, was never to know.

(To be continued.)

Shown at the Oracle Theater every Tuesday and Wednesday.